

The social media: the fortunate unfortunate village square for hate propaganda

Abstract

This treatise is a qualitative research in philosophy and literary studies and it considers fake news (misinformation and disinformation) from the perspective of hate speech. It focuses on the social media as the contemporary day smart village square for all sorts of hate mongering. This is one of the ill-starred pitfalls of the bandwagon called “globalization”. The buzz word ‘globalization’ is a catchword that points to the prevailing moment in human history of civilization and development-the age of digital-micro-lization of the world space. The fulcrum of globalization is communicative technologies. The presence of advanced communicative technologies or facilities like the internet, satellite, android phones and other related smart gadgets has made global communication now easy and swift; since these facilities have the capability to move information from one part of the globe to the other (within a slit-second). It is in this sense that the world is now called a global village. However, the paradox of this village square enabled by the social media networking is that it is relishing and at the same time palpably fraught. Positively, social media is accessible, interactive, immediate and relevant; negatively, one among the numerous causes for alarm is the rising misappropriation of social networking sites for hate speech. Employing analytic and hermeneutical methods, the philosophico-literary discourse critically interrogates the misappropriation of this artificial and synthetic neighborhood for the proliferation of all sorts of inciting, poisonous, destructive, divisive, manipulative and inflammable speeches. This study reveals that two fundamental factors are responsible for the thriving of hate speech in this techno-neighborhood, i. humans nowadays are gullible to the point of naïvely believing any information from the social media as true and correct; ii. lack of censorship and quality control of most social media. Consequently, the ultimate goal of the chapter is to seek for philosophically pragmatic remedy to this malady in order to advance the frontiers of this creative and emerging technology. Therefore, the researchers present a number of philosophico-literary theoretical frameworks and modalities to stern the tide of hate speech explosion in the social media.

Keywords: globalization, hate propaganda, misinformation and disinformation, social media, village square

Introduction

The emerging smart village, the Social Media is an ambivalent phenomenon that science and information technology has gifted humanity. With just a mere click or faint tap, the world in its entirety is condensed into a village square. This condensation is not in a metaphoric sense or in the sense of seeing the Social Media as the microcosm of the world, but in the sense that one (or at least one's ideas) could virtually walk the length and breadth of the world and interact with different people and their ideas with just that click or tap of the information gadget. Hence, the sensational word ‘globalization’ is a catchword that depicts the extant moment in human history of development and civilization-the age of digitalization and micro-lization of the world-space. The vital or animating force of globalization is communicative technologies, with the provisions of modern communicative technologies or facilities like the internet systems, mobile phones, satellite, etc. global communication is now easy, since these facilities have the power to move things from one part of the world to the other (even within a split-second). It is in this sense that the world is now called a global village, because of the communication network around the world. This communication network makes domestic and international interactions and cultural exchange swift, immediate and relevant.

Although the social media has fortunately provided the artificial frontiers that are readily availing people useful pieces of information

and thereby drastically eliminating the distance between people, it has also however, ironically become a frontier for disinformation and misinformation. Social Media can be a divisive force as it could be a veritable tool to peddle and proliferate prejudice, rumors, fake news and propaganda that could culminate in enthroning hate speech as the king of popular opinion(s) about a person, people, place(s), idea(s) or thing(s). This paradox makes social media relishing and at the same time fraught. It is on this note that this discourse explores the ambivalence of Social Media as the fortunate unfortunate village square for hate propaganda, pointing out the factors that fuel the rapid propagation of hate speech on Social Media and proffering a theoretical framework that will serve as a panacea to this problem. Without prejudice to the pitfalls of this emerging technology, this discourse maintains that it is relishing, promising and innovatively advancing the course of human existence; as such it must be safeguarded.

Meaning of social media

To properly conceptualize the meaning of the term “social media”, it is instrumentally useful that we first and foremost separately define the two words (“social” and “media”) that make of the term. The popular word “social” could be described as referring to the association of a species of living beings with other living beings. The essence of this intercourse is to foster collective co-existence not minding whether or not such interaction is voluntary or involuntary.¹ The concept could also mean companionship or association with one's

fellow: friendly or intimate intercourse (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). Further, it denotes fellowship, communion, organization, association, solidarity, relations, dialogue and interaction. Although the term may be employed to conceptualize the interactions of virtually all living organisms, however it is mostly used to denote the relations between human beings. Hence, the closest word to the term is the society. The key defining factor of society is peoples' symbolic dialogue with each other influenced and bonded by normative systems, traditions and lore that collectively represent their culture.

The gregarious nature of human beings essentially makes it inexorable for humans to exist, live, survive and flourish only within the context of interpersonal relationships or social intercourse or dialogue. The Organic/Harmony Theory of society talks about the naturalness of society to man (the individual). It sees man or the individual as an animal that is essentially designed to exist and flourish in dialogue with other human individuals only within the context of the society. The theory conceives society as a biological system, a greater organism, alike in its structure and its functions. Plato and Aristotle can be plausibly seen as the founding exponents of this theory; while in the modern time, Herbert Spencer is considered its prominent defender. Therefore the term social ontologically refers to people's interactions, relations, activities and collective experiences as humans. This interaction may be situated within a geographical area or climate and may not also be limited to any identifiable physical space or place (this interaction can happen in virtual environments). Humans enjoy an ontological social cobweb or networking that simply indicates that each and every individual human being's life, survival and flourishing are inexorably yoked to this ontological social cobweb. Hence, aided by the quantum or mega shift in communication and information technologies, we can now talk about virtual social interactions. To be specific, humans' interactions or dialogues at the virtual space provided in the cloud and made possible by various medium called (social) media.

The concept 'media' can be simply delineated as referring to the chief methods of mass communication. The term mass communication describes communication between large numbers of people in a given time. There are basically two types of media-print media and electronic media. The electronic media is further divided into broadcast media and social media; and the latter falls under the purview of the thrust of this exposition.

The term "social media" is formed by the amalgamation of the words 'social' and 'media' or by placing both side by side. Literally, the term social media can be interpreted as the media for the peoples' interaction or the media of social dialogue or activities. It could also be described as the platform for social activities outside the natural physical environment or space. The phenomenal term "Social media" has been described as Internet-based software and interfaces that allow individuals to interact with each other through the exchange of certain details about their lives-such as biographical data, personal photos, personal videos, professional data and current ideas.² The keywords in the above definition are internet-based, software and interfaces. These words leave us with the impression that first, social interactions at this level are enabled by the internet in the virtual arena (software); second, it also involves networking or it integrates networks (interfaces of networks).

The social media is an internet based techno-sphere that enables the transfer and proliferation of information, ideas and thoughts (Social Media: Definition, Effects, and List of Top Apps, 2022). The techno-sphere being made up of virtual networks and communities, the information, thoughts or ideas that are being communicated are

in the following forms; Joint Photographic Expert Group (JPEG), Portable Network Graphics (PNG), Graphic Interchange Format (GIF), Portable Document Format (PDF), Scalable Vector Graphic (SVG), and Moving Pictures Experts Group (MP4) among others. The social Media is then a gamut of links to virtual places, communities or people depending on the interest(s) of the individual or people engaging or using it. The interests could range from business, fashion, sports, gaming, relationship, self-help, entertainment, religion, food, travelling and gaming among others.

Furthermore, social media entails signing up, creating a profile and continual creation of "content" and post or view and relate to contents that were created by other pages' administrators. It further entails following or subscribing to a given page or community of a given interest in order to continually get updated once a new post is made by the admins. Another important definition of social media worth noting is the definition advanced by Kumar and Bobby, that describes it as the "activities that integrate technology, social interaction and content creation... micro blogs and more". Common examples of the social media include Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, Yuletide, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tiktok, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Flickr, Wechat, Vimeo, Viber, Bizsugar, Zoom and Google Classroom. These and a lot others fall under what is known as Web.

Key characteristics of social media

In order to achieve a concrete conceptualization and significant graphic portrayal of the nature and essence of the social media, it is pertinent to discuss the main characteristics of the social media. Charles Wankel outlined the basic characteristics of the social media to include:

- a) Free Web Space:
- b) Unique Web Address:
- c) Possibility of Building Profiles:
- d) Virtual Connection with Friends and Relatives
- e) Real Time Content Upload Facility
- f) Feedback
- g) Time Stamp

Free web space

The social media have created a limitless virtual space for the free dwelling of all humans. Social media websites or links users take advantage of the free virtual space provided by the internet to upload their contents. There is just enough space for any and every content and soft material one may wish to upload into this web space provided by the internet and social media. Unlike the limited physical space, so long such baggage is soft and one has internet subscription, he or she can occupy whatever amount of space they want in the virtual estate provided by the social media.

Unique web address

The users of social media have the opportunity to have personalized unique web address and unique identity that enable them to share their e-content in real time.³ This unique or personalized web address may be likened to private physical address obtainable in the regular world.

Space for building profiles

One unique feature of the social media is that it creates the possibility for people to build personalized profiles. Based on this

possibility, the social media grants the individual access to like-minded people to interact with each other.³ In other words, speaking with specific reference to the educational industry, respective professionals from different fields are granted access to various platforms where they meet in the cloud for the purpose of enriching their professional experience for optimal productivity. To achieve this lofty possibility, “social media spaces have recently been integrated into the tertiary educational system (curriculum). Educationists take advantage of these sites to synergize and harmonize informal and formal education. They take positive advantage of these sites to create personal online profiles, interact with their colleagues and to share ideas useful to their field and discipline. In order to maintain the core essence of creating these online profiles, these users define boundaries and choose specific individuals with whom they may connect to and definitely for exchange of relevant knowledge (Boyd and Ellison, cited in Khanam, Quraishi and Kausar. These boundaries became necessary to forestall the intrusion of unwanted contents and individuals that are capable of derailing the core values and essence of creating such specialized profiles.

Enables virtual connections with friends and relatives

This is one of the stronghold and core significance and essence of the social media. Its websites and links constitutes the arena for virtual meetings. Individuals who are miles apart are now able to communicate (in audio or video) through such website-enabled chat engines. One of the most interesting things about these websites is that they even provide the possibility for people to exchange ideas stuffs and contents.³ This fact was affirmed by Ramanigopal, Palaniappan and Hemalathan, who disclosed that the social network provides the arena where people converge for friendship, exchange of ideas and images, argument, promotion of business and to establish associations without their physical presence. The possibility for sharing these stuffs is not limited to just family and friends, it is also opened to those who have not known each other from Adam. Strangers meet in social media sites and eventually become friends, to the exchange pleasantries, valuables and stuffs. The possibility of people from places far apart to meet, interact and share pleasantries and other soft materials are responsible for the continual shrinkage of the globe. It is based on this tokenism that people now refer to the world as a global village.

Provides real time content upload facility

This feature leverages and furthers the possibility provided by the social media for people to build personalized profiles. The social media provides the capacity and enablement for users to upload their profiles and personalized contents because social media render twenty four hours services through the year.³ Real time also implies that people can upload their contents as they are happening live and events of the moment also immediately find their way into this supra geographical synthetic environment. Apart from offline services, the social media also provides the marvelous opportunity for real time services and relations between people.

Feedback

The phenomenon or reality of feedback is one of the hallmarks of the social media, because feedback is a very vital element of communication. What is most fundamental about social media that makes it fascinating and relishing is the fact that in the social media arena feedback is immediate as it happens in physical or face to face communication, in as much as the person or people or responder at the other end is equally online when the sender initiates the interaction.³ Moreover, interactions in this electronic-enabled space become more

relishing for the fact that it allows both audio and video interactions and text-messaging.

Time stamp

Time stamp indicates whether or not a given post or online content is recent or old. This feature characterizes every post in the social media as it points out whether or not such post is current or stale. Hence, the status of a given post influences the response of a given user. He or she may decide to either respond or withhold response.³ This is also a good characteristic of the social media because it would help users to distinguish between current and past information.

Accessibility and immediacy

Moreover, another index that positions social media sites as conducive environments for learning is accessibility. Unlike the traditional media, social media sites are open to the public without government restrictions.⁴ This factor of free access enables whoever wishes to move into its space for education-related activities to do so anytime, any day and anywhere. There are other two attributes of the social media that makes them suitable for contemporary education.

These characteristics of the social media discussed above leave one with the soothing euphoria and nostalgia for the social media as a fundamentally pragmatic tool for integral interaction in the contemporary society. The social media is the brainchild of the astonishing phenomenal revolution of science and technology in information technologies. “Judging from the monumental and trail-blazing posture or characteristic of science and technology, the nickname, if at all, that may suitably code name science and technology is ‘ultra-radical progress’”⁵. Since humans started living in the society, science and technology has been the cornerstone of human and societal evolution and development.⁵

Infor-communication technologies and globalization: the global village square

In the African traditional context, a “Village Square” is the section of the village (that constitute the given village) where people come together to discuss issues that concerns them as a community or groups within it (Eluwa, 2010). In some cases (especially in the Igbo traditional society devoid of kings and palaces), disputes are settled in the village square and judgments reached. Recreational events such as games, competitions, jokes and the likes are also carried out in the village square as depicted by the wrestling scene in chapter six of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. It therefore follows that the village square provides the forum for both grave discussions and activities on one hand, and on the other hand, recreations and “light” discussions. The idea of a village square connotes some kind of close connection and interactions and interfaces between and among peoples that are immediate, swift and relevant in a given neighborhood or clime.

The extant virtual society established by social media digital revolution and innovation is synonymous with the Afriko-traditional village square portrayed above. The latest revolution that has happened in human history which is termed digital revolution is only possible as a result of the exponential advancement of technology in general and informative/communicative technologies. The entire world is today considered a global village, thanks to this phenomenal and sensational revolution. The term globalization captures the digital revolution that is increasingly and exponentially integrating the world culturally, economically, politically, etc. It encapsulates an intensified singularization and intermingling of societies that have never happened in human history and development.⁵ In other words,

the world is now called a global village because of the communication network around the world. According to Pantaleon Iroegbu,⁶ “On the international plane, more contact and easier communication have made the world a village in which no nation can be on its own again: self-sufficient or self-conceited. International co-operation is now a sine qua non of national survival”. The conceptualization of the today world as a global village expresses the increasing interconnectedness and interdependency of people and economies the world over that makes physical borders more or less a mirage. This truism is graphically encapsulated in what follows:

Never in human history has societies been so closely bound and boundaries so removed, as they are in our century. Never also in human history have cultures influenced each other so gradually and yet deeply, as they have in our century. The results are massive: the Arab spring, which no doubt resulted from, among other things, the knowledge of possibilities of resisting political and religious leaders as obtainable in cultures outside the Arab world, is one of such consequences. These are themselves results of a situation best captured by the idea of globalization, and the time described as ‘global times’.

The buzz word that captures the increasing microlization of the world space and convergence of societies is globalization. Globalization refers to the dynamic interconnectedness and cultural interactions of nations made possible by contemporary innovative communication technologies. Technology has permeated, penetrated, and infiltrated human existence and experience in the society in all facades and has eliminated the distance between peoples, nations, and geographical spaces. In other words, it has made the physical spaces and distances appear like mirages and delusion. Globalization is perceived as a homogenizing process, creating one global culture (mono-culture). A process targeted at creating a worldwide culture to make the world a global village.⁵ It is worthwhile to assert that:

One of the most important factors that fuel the dynamism is the increased flexibility of technology that connects people around the world. Globalization is a wide-ranging universal influence on humanity’s existence, experience, and intercourse; as it is tending towards reducing the world into a singularized society. The future of this singularized society is a world without borders or walls. Consequently, globalization presupposes connection and interaction.⁵

One of the most powerful communication technologies that has micronized or digitalized the world space that is of paramount interest to this discourse is the social media.

Social media as a village square

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski defined societies in terms of their technological sophistication. As a society advances, so does its use of technology. It is of significant importance to assert that the progressive change from preindustrial societies to the industrial society was gradual or linear (1-2-3-4-5-6 etc.); however, the progressive change from the industrial society to the prevailing postindustrial society is phenomenally exponential (1-2-4-8-16-48 etc.). Communication technologies have developed and transmuted societies into a single digital village reminiscence of the traditional village square.

By its virtue of sharing similar trait of ambivalence with the village square, it is not out of place to describe the social media as a global village square in the sense that the social media is a brewing stew of all sort of ideas and activities that fall under serious, recreational or “light”. Vallor⁷ captures the ambivalence of the social media (akin to the feature of the village square) better while describing the nature of the “News Feed” of Facebook. According

to her, daily Facebook users are exposed to different ideas that are somewhat not related; for instance one may see a link to an article in a reputable magazine that will be followed by the clip of a cat in a funny costume which is then followed by a long status updated by someone about their birthday, or lunch or even heartbreaks and so on. In other words, social media is a conglomeration of diverse ideas and issues. Vallor⁷ also pointed out that though the user is at liberty to choose which category of the newsfeed he or she wants to pay more attention to, the user cannot totally shroud himself or herself from coming in contact with the diverse contents that are being generated by other users. Which shows that whether a user likes it or not, once a hate propaganda is posted on any social media platform he or she will see it.

The social media as the fortunate unfortunate village square for hate propaganda

Etymologists traced the root of the word “propaganda” to the ablative singular gerundive of the Latin word “propagare” which means to spread.⁸ Initially it was used by the Catholic Church in 1622 as the name for Congregation or administrative body that is charged with the responsibility of spreading the Christian faith in non-Christian areas. However, the term gained admission into the secular lexicon in the 1970’s and was eventually clothed with negative connotation of spreading biased or false information in the mid-nineteenth century especially in the political sector. It is in the context of the latter, that this paper uses the term propaganda, namely using the social media as a tool for the spread of fake or biased information aimed at stirring up hate. Today, the social media is saturated or flooded with massive hate speeches. Auwal,⁹ defined hate speech as:

Any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Essentially, such speeches rob others of their dignity, including: (a) all dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means; (b) incitement to hatred, contempt or discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin; (c) threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in (b) above; (d) expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds in (b) above, when it clearly amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination; (e) participation in organisations and activities which promote and incite racial discrimination.

Simply, hate speech refers to all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcomed for any other reasons.⁹ The intent of hate speech in whatever forms it comes to is to incite and create divisions and conflict and even aggression through disinformation or misinformation or both.

Albert Borgman a German-American philosopher opined that the Social Media provides humans a sort of “hyperreality” that is alienated from the real world making it possible for users to offer to one another a romanticized versions of themselves, for gratifications, to boost their narcissistic ego and for gains among other purposes.¹⁰ The creation of this “hyperreality” entails selecting and omitting specific points of data in reality, weaving and portraying a version of one’s self or a world that is not entirely true or removed from reality. That is to say “hyperreality” blurs the stark difference between truth and lies, fake and real so much that what is initially considered as authentic becomes counterfeit.

The gulf between the virtual “hyperreal” world of the social media and the real physical world of human interactions create a formidable and fertile land for the seeds of hate propaganda to be sown and nurtured regardless of whether the information proliferated have been validated or not. Also, these pseudo-identities some users have created for themselves (that are not entirely true or disconnected from reality) make it possible for the spread of social media driven misinformation geared towards the proliferation of hate propaganda. Once it is posted, the efficiency, connectivity, simplicity and accessibility of the social media makes the hate propaganda to travel far and wide like a wildfire.

To make matters worse, the validity and truthfulness of “Contents” created and posted does not matter much to some Users. What matters much to them are the views, likes, comments or shares it gets from users. For the number of these likes, shares, comments and views will determine if the page or users’ account qualifies to be verified or not, plus the money the traffic generated will fetch the admin. For this reason, propaganda sells more than truth sometimes as it generates more views and traffics which make the page commercially viable. Little wonder then Baudrillard averred that “hyperreality” does not just provoke the question or discourse on false representation of reality (ideology), instead it raises concerns about concealing facts so much that the real is no longer real.¹¹ Against this backdrop, the social media becomes a contrivance for misinformation and disinformation. These two concepts cannot be used interchangeably because they speak to different realities. Specifically, on the one hand misinformation occurs when false or out-of context facts are shared and reported as truth; while on the other hand disinformation consists of a deliberate fabrication of information designed for nefarious purposes.¹² Mischief elements in the society purposefully cease the social media for the proliferation of reprehensible materials that are capable of instigating violent conflicts.

The social media indubitably represents a village square for the thriving of conflict triggered and fueled by hate propaganda. For instance, the virtual environment of the social media enables “incitement to violence; the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda; recruitment into armed groups; and the growing role of social media to suppress opposition”.¹³ “...social media village is susceptible to nefarious manipulation, including rampant harassment and echo chambers that silence political debates and amplify the spread of disinformation”.¹⁴

Observation and recommendations

From the discourse so far, it is clear that the social media has become the fortunate unfortunate village square for the spread of hate propaganda due to the following factors. First, the social media is a technology-enabled means of communication; a virtual space with high connectivity, simplicity and accessibility to people across the globe thereby making it possible for the hate propaganda to reach a mass audience. Second, because it is a virtual space, some users make a “hyperreality” of it by churning reality, mixing it with untruths to create a romanticized version of themselves or of the world which is either not entirely true or removed from reality. This “hyperreality” makes the spread of hate propaganda very easy. Third, users wanting to generate traffics or have their pages (accounts) qualify for verification will post anything to generate likes. Hate propaganda happens to be a “stock” that will not only sell, but attracts the attention of many users which translates to amassing many “likes”, “views” and “shares” among others. The potential for hate propaganda to go viral on social media raises concerns as to how it could be controlled or curbed. Against this backdrop, the question arises, What is the theoretical

framework or methodology a social media user could employ in distinguishing truth from false or in sifting out truth buried from a body of work that is more of fiction?

As a matter of fact, it will be difficult to give a clear cut theoretical frame-work for determining the authenticity of a social media “content” or to know whether it is aimed at proliferating hate propaganda or not. This is difficult based on two counts: i. it is difficult to have a global consensus on how to determine the authenticity of “contents” and regulation of social activities; (ii) even if it is possible to map out a theoretical framework, at the end of the day, it boils down to the individual user in question.

Pondering on the discipline of individual users with regards to the use of social media and accessing information. Sunstein¹⁵ held that people seek out the information they agree with on Social Media. This simply means that they guard their minds and “clicks” against contents that seem to contradict with their held opinions, whether superior or not in terms of truism. It therefore means that the individual has control over what influences his or her perception of things despite being exposed to a wide range of ideas online. This is not suggesting that the individual has the final say regarding the authenticity of social media “contents”. However, it is a call for personal censorship and responsibility. Users are encouraged to do some fact-checking before believing or sharing any “content”. This could be done by checking other sites (especially the ones that are reputable) for corroboration. By so doing, the proliferation of hate propaganda will be reduced or stopped.

Digital and media literacy for all levels of education should be integrated into the curriculum to foster in young folks the critical mindedness for the critical analysis and appraisal of social media contents. Regardless of the identified advertent and inadvertent negative consequences of this smart learning tool and digital territory, it remains an inviolable necessary evil that humans must invest heavily in because artificial intelligence, nano technology and digital economy collectively constitutes the new world order. There is the expedient need for the development of effective quality control and assurance mechanisms to forestall real and imagined disruptive and destructive tendencies of the social media.¹⁶

Conclusion

Social Media could be a uniting force or a veritable tool for division especially when used to peddle hate speech propaganda. As a Village Square, it provides the forum for discussing and sharing serious issues while still creating room for recreational activities such as games and jokes among others. It gives the room for Users to express themselves or view others express themselves. However, to guide against disinformation, misinformation and incitement to hate, the individual User is called upon to employ personal censorship, be responsible and indulge in fact checking by consulting other reputable sources for corroboration of any given “content”.

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